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ABSTRACT

The paper examines key issues in the future of gifted education, first noting the emphasis in the current literature on the need for restructuring the curriculum, particularly in science and mathematics. Findings regarding definitions of gifted children are examined, noting the frequent practice of arbitrarily identifying those dimensions of giftedness which should be nurtured. Questions are raised regarding the primary purpose of the education of the gifted, criteria for developing identification systems, the nature of experiences provided to the gifted, qualifications of teachers, components of a quality educational program for gifted students, and program evaluation. (CL)

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Prepared Remarks

for

Gifted Education in the 80's: Pitfalls and Possibilities

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by

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Introduction: The Current Educational Climate

Over twenty years ago, national reports ushered in a new era for educational and curriculum change, predominantly in science and mathematics. Today, education again is faced with a barrage of reports that point out deficiencies in the current educational curriculum and instruction in mathematics and science but also in other content dimensions as well. A Nation at Risk reports on the abysmal failure of public education in exposing students to full secondary programs in science and mathematics. The Carnegie Report further documents the need for more advanced course-taking in these subjects by larger numbers of the secondary school population. The College Board's Project Equality outlines maximum competency skills in the academic areas whose mastery is required in today's technologically advanced world. And the most stringent recommendations on curriculum come from the National Science Commission Report that prescribes four full years of science and mathematics for the majority of students in our schools. Implementing such recommendations would require a massive change in course-taking patterns. A recent report completed for the California State Department of Education (Harnischfeger and Wiley, 1983) found that only 5% of last year's California secondary school graduates and only 2.2% of those in Illinois would meet the standards for course-taking set forth in the National Science Commission Report, even excluding the computer recommendation.

Some of the leading educational thinkers in America today are concurrently publishing treatises on what ideal schooling should be. From a curricular viewpoint, Adler's Paedaeia Proposal advocates a basic liberal arts education for all with a focus on traditional content and the objectives of knowledge acquisition, thinking skill development, and aesthetic appreciation on a K-12

basis. From an administrative perspective, Goodlad's A Place Called School explores fundamental deficiencies in how schools are organized to carry out instructional tasks. And from an instructional vantage point, Bloom's work on mastery learning provides a model for viewing the systematic and progressive development of skills in various domains of knowledge as the hallmark of good teaching and learning.

Based on the proliferation of reports on problems and treatises on remedies, it is clear that American education is experiencing a period of pressure for educational reform and curricular change. Particularly there is renewed interest in focusing efforts on the academically talented whose educational success can represent maximum performance benefits to the institutions which serve them well. They further can serve as exemplars for enhancing the educational enterprise for those less able.

Major Unresolved Issues in Gifted Education

While an examination of the general education climate may be useful for understanding the current interest in gifted education and may presage future efforts in this area, it does not sufficiently inform around key issues and questions that need attention in the eighties regarding the implementation of programs and services for a special population termed gifted and/or talented. It may be useful then to probe some of these key issues and explore their implications for future possibilities and directions of the field.

What is a Gifted Child?

Despite the fact that the field is replete with definitions of giftedness and/or talent, there persists a lack of consensus around a unified conceptual viewpoint. What are the conceptual implications in each category of definition

currently being espoused at an operational level (see attached page for list of current definitions in use)? Are we defining giftedness in terms of capacity, performance, talent in a specific field, or a cluster of traits?

When one examines the research literature that pertains to the behaviorial characteristics of gifted children or eminent adults, several consensual findings tend to emerge:

1) that giftedness is more than g-factor intelligence, at least as measured by an intelligence test.
2) that there are degrees of giftedness, with individuals operating at various levels within and across intellectual domains.
3) that both genetic and environmental factors probably account for gifted behavior, particularly in adulthood.
4) that giftedness may manifest itself predominantly in one area or in several.
5) that while the potential for giftedness can be identified at young ages, the final determinant is frequently judged to be adult performance.
6) that giftedness at extreme levels may represent a difference in kind not just degree of functioning.
7) that factors other than ability play an equally important role in defining gifted behavior. These factors appear to cluster around the traits of:

a) Creativity

Viewed by some researchers as a separate construct from giftedness and by others as a part of it, creativity implies the ability to produce the novel, the original, to be a problem-finder rather than just a problem-solver, to think divergently and to generate new ideas and/or products.

Selected Definitions of Giftedness

Passow et al. (1955): "Talent is the capacity for superior achievement in any socially valuable area of human endeavor, but limiting the areas to such academic fields as languages, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics; such art fields as music, graphic and plastic arts, performing arts, and mechanic arts; and the field of human relations."

Witty (1958): "A child is gifted whose performance, in a potentially valubale line of human activity, is consistently remarkable."

The United States Office of Education (USOE) and selected states (1974): "Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society.

Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:

1) general intellectual ability;
2) specific academic aptitude;
3) creative or productive thinking;
4) leadership ability;
5) visual and performing arts;
6) psychomotor ability."

Note: In 1979, USOE deleted direct reference to psychomotor ability in a revised definition.

Renzulli (1980): "Giftedness consists of an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits - these clusters being above-average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Children who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs."

b) Persistence/Motivation/Task Commitment

This quality, referred to in the literature under the disparate terminology indicated, relates to an individual's capacity to stay with a task to completion, to not be deterred from working on a task because of obstacles, to focus large amounts of time and energy on an issue.

8) that giftedness is multidimensional, encompassing the domains of the academic, the social, the artistic, and the psychomotor.

While in theory, the definition of a gifted child may reflect complex combination of variables, in practice there is usually an arbitrary decision made regarding what dimensions or aspects of giftedness are most valuable to identify and nurture in a particular context at a given point in time.

What should be the primary purpose and focus of the education of the gifted?

A society's determination of the focus and direction of the education of its gifted young makes a broad statement regarding its own self-image. Gallagher (1975) has long maintained that America has a love-hate relationship with the gifted - eager to laud winners in competitive arenas yet angered by differences in other contexts. Thus the development of a philosophy on the education of the gifted requires a merging of societal concerns and individual needs in a context that encourages an understanding and appreciation of individual and group differences. However, the issue of focus remains: should individual development be encouraged to the possible detriment of so-called societal progress, individualistic behaviors to the demise of a conforming socetal model? Or should talent development have to depend on a societal notion of what is valuable at a particular time in history?

What criteria should guide the development of systems for the identification of the gifted and talented?

The identification of gifted students should emanate from both a definition of who the gifted are as well as from a philosophy regarding the goal of their education, since the identification process is usually interactive with the nature of a planned program intervention. However, there exists a lack of resolution over several issues in this area. Should there be a national standard for identification rather than a relative standard at the local level? With limited resources, should there be priorities for identification within gifted populations, and if so, what criteria should be used to determine order of service delivery (i.e. should the disadvantaged highly gifted be identified and served first because of the potentially greater discrepancy between instructional program and functional level)? Should a greater priority be placed on early identification, even prior to school entry? Should children even be identified and labelled or should the focus shift to providing quality programs?

What should be the nature of experiences provided to gifted learners?

While the field of gifted education is not prolific with intervention studies, it is apparent that the body of literature on acceleration (see Daurio, 1979) places it in the category of an appropriate experience for some gifted learners. Generally, there is consensus in the literature that students operating two standard deviations above the norm on an appropriate measure, can profit from accelerative experiences. Much descriptive literature has been written about enrichment experiences that broaden a student's view of the world of knowledge (Gallagher 1975; Kaplan, 1979; Renzulli, 1975; Feldhusen, 1979). Counseling has been seen as important to the emotional and social growth of the gifted learner as well as an important underpinning to any academic program devised (Gowan, 1965; Colangelo and Zaffran, 1975; Piechowski, 1983 in press). Since

acceleration, enrichment, and counseling represent the major interventions used with the gifted over the last eighty years, it remains to decide which are most effective under what set of circumstances with what kinds of gifted learners. And should not the nature of appropriate experiences reflect the purpose for which special educational programs are developed for this population; namely to nurture high potential students in such a way that they become creative productive adults who are future leaders in society? Given this as a purpose, what clustering of experiences over time is most apt to produce the desired result?

Who should provide service to the gifted learner?

Much of the research on eminent adults tends to suggest that important individuals, not schools or teachers per se, have had a profound effect on intellectual and artistic attainments. Usually such individuals were part of the family unit, a mentor, a tutor, or a special teacher. The effectiveness of the talent search model over time (Benbow and Stanley, 1983) tends to suggest that a collaborative effort between higher education institutions and elementary/secondary institutions can benefit substantial numbers of highly gifted learners. Such data raise questions around the role of the local school in talent development and even more, the role of the typical classroom teacher. Are special qualities necessary to work with the gifted learner, even given an effective training program? Should the focus be on training teachers or on training potentially effective individuals? What kind of training emphasis might be most appropriate--in-depth work in a specialty area such as science, the development of effective instructional procedures and strategies, or understanding the nature and needs of the target population? What criteria might be used to determine the appropriateness of individuals and/or institutions in working with the gifted?

What constitutes a high quality educational program for gifted learners?

Since quality education is a concern for all students in our schools, what standards of excellence can be employed that would ensure that the most able have the opportunity to be the most productive? There is a need to focus on some key issues in deciding what constitutes educational quality for this population. The most obvious is the qualities of the facilitator (teacher/mentor, etc.) working with such students. How can one balance the need for high-level competence with the need for personal qualities that provides a context for role-modeling and where can such individuals most likely be found? Quality programs are also visible by their curriculum, the degree to which it responds to the needs of the learner, is dynamic, is sufficiently advanced and challenging, and is well-planned and organized with attention to scope and sequence. And finally quality programs can be discerned through their regard for efficiency and effectiveness. Student growth gains are measured, and expectation levels for proficiency well-defined within a time frame that is sufficient for student progress. The challenging issue is how to develop and implement such programs in a context that provides the comprehensive range of services needed on an articulated basis over time. What cooperative models might be developed among institutions to effect such program development? Or can individual schools reorganize and reallocate resources to provide it? Is there consensus around what markers constitute an appropriate program for differing populations of gifted learners?

How can "quality" programs be evaluated?

The dearth of literature on the effects of program intervention (Gallagher, 1982) may be as indicative of ineffectual means to measure program treatment as it is of low quality programs. What evaluation approaches are most appropriate to use in the context of special gifted programs? Can evaluation data be effectively used to engender greater support for special programs? Of the

evaluation models used in extant intervention studies (i.e. quasi-experimental, comparison, goal-based, product review, attitudinal), which appears most promising for future work?

Conclusion

While there appears to be a favorable climate in the eighties for working on issues in the field of the education of the gifted, the embryonic state of the art implies a need to focus first on key issues that need some resolution before widespread program development efforts can have much impact. In this way, real progress might be made in avoiding an over-reaction to the current educational outcry for serving the talented through whatever means available; and energy might be systematically directed toward research and development efforts that have the potential to advance the field.

Appendix A

Needs in Gifted Education

Needs in Gifted Education

1. Need for more special programs (Gallagher, 1982)
2. Need for comprehensive programs that are articulated across grade levels (IOE, 1978; Richardson study, in progress)
3. Need for in-service training for teachers (Gallagher, 1982)
4. Need for increased financial support bases (Gallagher, 1982, IOE; 1978)
5. Need for curriculum development (Gallagher, 1982; Richardson study)
6. Need for valid instructional materials (Gallagher, 1982)
7. Need for more research (Gallagher, 1982)
8. Need for demonstration programs (Gallagher, 1982; Richardson study)
9. Need for consistency in identification procedures and standards (Gallagher, 1982; IOE, 1978)
10. Need for consistency in program delivery based on student needs rather than district resources (IOE, 1978)
11. Need for consistent and selective criteria for choosing teachers of the gifted (IOE, 1978)
12. Need for philosophical support from professional colleagues (administrators and teachers) (IOE, 1978; Gallagher, 1982; Richardson study)

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